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## MEXICAN HUMAN SACRIFICE.

CEREMONIAL slaughter of human beings has been practised in the world widely and for various reasons. Where the belief exists that earthly social grades and relations are continued in the other world, it is natural to dispatch wives and slaves to minister to a dead man in his new life. In this case the slaying is merely an expression of respect and kindness to the deceased — simple social etiquette; the victim fulfils the duty of his or her station, and no religious sentiment is involved. The same thing is true when a captive or other person is killed and eaten merely for food or to acquire his qualities (courage, wisdom, and the like); the procedure in such cases is physically or psychically economic. If a man is killed in order that his ghost may harass an enemy, this again is a social secular act, not religious. If the object of the slaughter is to secure a skull as a powerful supernatural thing, guardian or oracular, we have a religious ceremony, a wise provision for the ministrant's welfare. He takes a skull as he would take a magic stone or the claw of a magic animal; but to get the skull its owner must be killed.

A different element enters when human blood or the offering of human life is required to insure fertility of soil or of animals, or stability of houses or bridges. In some cases the ritual conception in this ceremony appears to be the recognition of the magical power residing in blood considered as the seat of life. The motive is economic, and the procedure is scientific in so far as the blood is employed as a fertilizer; but as its fertilizing power depends not on its chemical ingredients, but on its superhuman qualities, the procedure assumes the form of magic ritual, possibly with a religious tinge. It is sometimes difficult or impossible to say whether such use of blood involves the conception of a distinctly supernatural force. In the central Australian economic (food-producing) ceremonies, for example, there is, according to the statements of Messrs. Spencer and Gillen,<sup>1</sup> nothing but the bare process; it appears to be

<sup>1</sup> *The Native Tribes of Central Australia.*

a sort of imitative magic. But it is possible that the blood employed is supposed to be acceptable and seductive to the controlling spirits of the various classes of animals.

In this latter case the ceremony involves the placation of a supernatural being by the offer of food. The food placed by the grave of a dead man was partly a tribute of respect, the fulfilment of a pious duty; in part, also, it was, doubtless, a gift designed to procure the good offices of the deceased. In a relatively late stage blood was a common offering to ghosts, as in the Athenian Anthesteria, and this was a true sacrifice. When ghosts grew into deities, the ceremonial offering of blood became an elaborate rite; and the custom might easily be carried over from ghosts or infernal deities to high gods. The blood offered might be non-human or human.

An obscure religious sentiment is to be recognized sometimes, also, in those cases, if any such exist, in which the sins or evils of a community are held to be massed in the person of a human being who is then slain, and thus the evils are got rid of.<sup>1</sup> The victim, in such a ceremony, is not a substitute for other human beings, nor is he an offering to a deity; he represents the idea that evil is a physical thing that may be thrust forth like a mass of wood or earth. The killing is ceremonial, communal, and apotropaic (that is, ultimately economic). In the crudest forms of the procedure there seems to be no religious idea; in the higher forms it is brought into connection with supernatural beings.

Ceremonial slaughter of human beings originates in a time of savagery when human life is little considered in itself. In many cases the victims are preferably children, perhaps because children are regarded as socially of less importance than adults. The practice survived in some ancient civilized nations, notably among the Semites (Carthaginians, Hebrews, and others); but in these cases it was connected with more advanced religious ideas.

The Mexican religious cult, in which human sacrifice figured largely, was relatively well developed, having a great apparatus of temples and priests, with elaborate ceremonies. Some of the sacrificial details are found in other cults; the act of slaughter is common to all animal sacrifices, and the barbarous mode of killing is a feature of social culture and is not in itself religiously important. There is, however, one detail of the cult (occurring in certain sacrifices) that is not found in the Carthaginian and other ancient ceremonies of human sacrifice: it is the reverent care that in certain cases was lavished on the victim for some time before he or she was put to death. The facts are familiar and need not be repeated here

<sup>1</sup> Some facts bearing on this point are collected by Frazer in his *Golden Bough*, ii, and Miss Harrison in her *Prolegom. to the Study of the Greek Religion*, ch. iii.

at length.<sup>1</sup> The main points are these: the victim was identified with the god to whom he was to be sacrificed; he received the dress and the name of the god, was luxuriously housed, and when he went forth was worshipped and prayed to as divine; after he was slain, his heart was offered to a god, his head was preserved as a sacred object, and (according to Herrera) his heart was eaten. It is obvious that this procedure differs from those described above. Its object is not to provide an attendant for a deceased chief or to secure good crops, nor merely to gain a head. Nor is Mr. Frazer's explanation satisfactory, namely, that the divine man must be slain that he may not incur the weaknesses of old age.<sup>2</sup> There is no suggestion of such an idea in the Mexican system. The identification of the victim with the god is naturally explicable as a development from the early rite in which the victim is regarded as divine by nature (as in the examples given below). Since the victim was a god and the continued presence of the god was desirable, it is not difficult to see how the custom arose of clothing the ministrant in the skin of the slain animal or man. Such a mode of personation is frequent in very early ceremonies, as in Australia and North America; a striking Greek instance is given by W. R. Smith,<sup>3</sup> though here later ideas also appear. The examples collected by Mr. Frazer of the slaying of divine kings and of their temporary abdication, while very interesting in themselves, do not appear to be connected with the placation of gods, and therefore have no bearing on the question of Mexican human sacrifice. So far as the mere act of slaughter is concerned, in this and every other animal sacrifice, it might be explained as necessary in order that blood or flesh might be offered to the deity, as, in fact, in Mexico the heart of the victim was so offered. But, as is remarked above, there are other details in the Mexican ceremony that demand explanation.

For the elucidation of the central fact of this ceremony—the religious reverence paid the victim before his death—we naturally seek similar customs in other nations. Exact and instructive parallels, however, it is difficult to find—ceremonies, that is, in which a human victim is petted before being slain, and in which an explanation of the whole procedure is suggested.<sup>4</sup> Failing this, we must look for parallels in which the victim is a beast, and the procedure simpler.

<sup>1</sup> They are given in Acosta's *Historia de las Indias*, bk. v. chs. 10, 21; Sahagun's *Histoire des choses de la Nouvelle Espagne* (Fr. trans.), bk. ii, ch. 5; Herrera's *Historia de las Indias Occidentales*, III, ii, caps. 16, 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Golden Bough*, ch. iii.

<sup>3</sup> *Religion of the Semites*, Additional Note G.

<sup>4</sup> A somewhat similar procedure is described, from Le Mercier, in Parkman's *Jesuits in North America*, p. 80. For India, see Weber, *Indische Streifen*, i, 65, and Hopkins, *Relig. of India*, p. 196.

Such ceremonies, more nearly primitive may suggest the desired explanation.

Certain of the features of the Mexican ritual appear in the bear festival of the Ainu.<sup>1</sup> The bear cub is carefully nurtured (sometimes suckled by the women) till he is of the proper age, and is then brought out, worried, and killed — slain, like the Mexican victim, in a savagely cruel manner. He is regarded as a god both before and after death. The invitation to the feast (which is prepared by the possessor of the cub) announces that the little divinity of the mountain is to be “sent away” — he is a messenger.<sup>2</sup> The address to the animal, before it is killed, asks pardon for what is to be done, assures him that great honor is thus paid him, and that abundance of food and drink will be sent along with him, and begs him to speak well of the people when he reaches his parents and other divine friends in the other world. Similar petitions are addressed to him after he is killed; his head is cut off and preserved as a sacred object; a potage of the flesh is partaken of by all persons present; his own flesh is set before the head as food and worship is offered it. He is prayed to return, that he may again be hunted and “sent away.” The belief that a slain animal reports to his fellows the manner of his treatment by men, and thus procures or prevents a plentiful supply of game, is widespread among the North American tribes; and in the California buzzard festival<sup>3</sup> the killing of the bird seems to be connected with the desire for an abundant supply of the species, though there is no suggestion of how this result is to be brought about. The Ainu ritual appears to give a definite reason for the killing of the animal: it is sent as a messenger to the inhabitants of the other world, not merely to procure a supply of game, but also to secure the good will of the Powers in the beyond. A respectful message, sent by a proper person, is in fact a natural way of gaining the favor of the powerful.

The character of emissary comes out plainly in the Borneo pig ceremonies described by Mr. Haddon.<sup>4</sup> When the object is divination by means of the pig's liver, the animal is asked to convey a message to the god; and as it is important that the message be carried correctly, the attention of the victim is secured, during the utterance of the address to the deity, by holding and prodding it. On the occasion of naming a child, when it is desired to know the

<sup>1</sup> I follow the description in John Batchelor's *The Ainu and their Folklore*, ch. 42.

<sup>2</sup> According to Mr. Batchelor the Ainu term corresponding to our “sacrifice” means to “send away.”

<sup>3</sup> See Frazer, *Golden Bough*.

<sup>4</sup> A. C. Haddon, *Head-Hunters*, pp. 336, 353 ff.

will of the appropriate god, the latter is not addressed directly, but the pig is the intermediary between him and the suppliant. The feeling seems to be that the god is too great a personage to be approached directly by men. The pig, the familiar friend of man, yet by its nature akin to the gods, is a natural go-between. The death of the animal is necessary, since only by this means can its soul go to the world of the gods, where it is conceived of as mingling on terms of equality with the divine inhabitants. The report of this ceremony says nothing of a hope for the return of the pig to earth, and very little of a friendly or caressing treatment of it before it is slain; the main point is its function as messenger, a function that supposes the existence of well-developed high gods.

The Ainu and Borneo ceremonies offer parallels to the two main points in the Mexican ritual, — the reverent treatment of the divine victim and its slaughter (and the tearing out of the man's heart in Mexico may be compared with the extraction of the pig's liver in Borneo). That the victim is carefully and honorably tended, we may suppose, is the expression partly of respect for its divine character, partly of desire to gain its good will and secure its good offices in the other world. Thus nurtured and petted, it may be expected to go its way cheerfully with its message to the gods. Such would be the conception of the ceremony in its earlier form. In the course of time, in a growing community, the cruder ideas of the ritual would be outgrown and forgotten, but the general procedure would persist as a traditional sacred and potent ceremony: the victim would be caressed and slain, not because it was regarded as an ambassador, but because such treatment was held, in accordance with tradition, to be acceptable to the gods; still later, the preliminary ceremony would be dispensed with, the slaughter of the victim would be regarded as the effective thing, and would be brought into relation with such other conceptions of gods and sin as might meantime have arisen.

In the earliest examples that I have found of this ambassadorial slaughter the victim is a beast; the slaying of human beings as sacrifice proper belongs to a relatively advanced cultural stage of society. There are no records to explain precisely the manner of the transition from beast to man; conjectures on this point must be derived from the general history of religious cults. It is known that the early intense and vital belief in the sacredness and divinity of beasts gradually faded away. Wild animals were relegated to a separate domain, and became more and more alienated from man; domestic animals were employed for labor and food, and lost, through familiarity, their sacred character except as it survived in obscured

form in certain stated and unexciting ceremonies ; totemistic creeds vanished with the adoption of the agricultural life. When there was a demand for a particularly powerful offering to the gods, human life, as more worthy and precious, would seem to be especially appropriate. Up to a certain stage of social growth such an offering would not be offensive to public taste. The slaying of human beings for various reasons (as is mentioned above) had long been practised, and a certain degree of savage indifference to human slaughter lingered long in half-civilized communities. Ancient methods of warfare (particularly, perhaps, among the Semites) were characterized by proceedings barbarous in the highest degree. In modern times illustrations are afforded by the wars between the Poles and the Russians in the seventeenth century, by the Thirty Years' War in Germany, and by the treatment of the Jews in Europe up to the seventeenth century. Thus, in ancient cults, where slaughter was the traditional form of sacrifice, no humane considerations would avail to deter men from offering what they thought would be most acceptable to the higher Powers.

In some such way, it may be supposed, occurred the transition from the simple process of sending a messenger to the gods to the sacrificial ritual of the Mexicans. It does not enter into the plan of this paper to discuss human sacrifice in general. When a ritual procedure has once been established, every succeeding generation will infuse into it its own religious ideas ; these later accretions must be distinguished from the original conception, and my object is to suggest one possible starting-point for the historical development of animal sacrifice in general and human sacrifice in particular.

A couple of American Indian ceremonies may be mentioned, the origin of which may be illustrated from the facts presented above. One of these is the White Buffalo Festival of the Uncpapas described by Miss Fletcher.<sup>1</sup> Of the many interesting details given by her it will be sufficient here to call attention to those that seem to have relation with our particular point. Her introductory remark is significant : "A man who kills a white buffalo is considered to have received a blessing from the gods." One naturally asks why the slaughter of the animal should be regarded as an evidence of divine favor and recognition ; the report of the ritual does not distinctly answer this question ; the answer must be sought in some underlying early conception. The main features of the ceremony are the divine worship offered to the dead body, and the solemn eating of

<sup>1</sup> Alice C. Fletcher, in the *Sixteenth Report of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology* (Cambridge, 1883) ; also as separate pamphlet (Salem, Mass., 1884).

the flesh of the animal. Food and drink are placed beside the head of the hide — an offering, the Indians say, to the buffalo ; pipes are presented to the hide and then to the chiefs ; portions of the hide are preserved as bringing good luck ; the skull is laid finally at the foot of the sacred pole ; soup, prepared from the scrapings of the hide, is eaten by all the men present, and the buffalo meat is solemnly eaten by the chiefs. That is, the animal is treated as a god, and the slaying of it is regarded as bringing a blessing from the gods. The ceremony is not totemistic ; no such religious worship is elsewhere paid a totem simply as a totem. The resemblance to the Ainu ritual suggests that the two may have had the same origin : the killing of the buffalo would then be meritorious because it was necessary that the soul of the animal should be sent as messenger to the high gods, and these latter would be pleased with such a mark of respect and homage. The Uncpapa ritual is a relatively advanced one, and it would not be surprising if certain primitive features — such as the preparatory caressing of the animal and the putting a message into its mouth — should have faded away. The Mexican ceremony has preserved the former of these features ; it is a familiar fact that in the transmission of early religious procedures different communities may retain or abandon different parts of the whole ; the complete ceremony is sometimes to be reconstructed from the scattered remains found in various cults.

Perhaps the Zuñi turtle ceremony may offer a vestige of the ambassadorial slaughter of an animal.<sup>1</sup> The sacred turtle, treated after its capture with every mark of respect and affection, is then killed, with prayers and offerings, its flesh and bones deposited in the river, and its shell preserved as a sacred thing in the house. The native comment on the procedure is that the turtle is a kinsman, that when killed it does not die, but only changes its place, goes to the home of its brothers. This is an expression of the widespread belief in the identity of certain animals with certain human beings, but it does not explain why the killing of the turtle was regarded as a religious duty. Mr. Frazer makes the suggestion that the object of the ceremony is to keep up communication with the souls of the departed, which are supposed to be assembled in the other world in the form of turtles. The suggestion is in the right direction, but is not definite enough. To make the communication effective a message must be sent. Of such message there is no mention in the record, but a comparison with the Ainu ritual makes it not improbable that the Zuñi ceremony is a refinement on an earlier procedure in which the soul of the slain animal was dispatched as ambassador

<sup>1</sup> See F. H. Cushing, "My Adventures in Zuñi," in *The Century* for May, 1883.



to the gods. The ceremony might be supposed, it is true, to belong in the same category with the numerous cases in which a slave or a kinsman is slain as messenger to a deceased person; but the elaborate details of the Zuñi ritual, the deep feeling manifested by the slayer, and the religious homage paid to the animal appear to invest it with a higher significance.

Other features besides the slaying of the victim enter into the rituals described above, particularly, the eating of the animal's flesh. This side of the sacrificial ceremony has its own line of development and requires a separate treatment. It seems to have originated in the desire to secure for the worshippers the potency of the sacred body; it was communal, as most religious functions were communal in early times, when the social unit was the clan or the larger family. From time to time it has been modified and reshaped as new ideas came in and the constitution of society changed.

As is suggested above, the ambassadorial sacrifice may be regarded as analogous to the custom of slaying a man in order that he may convey a message to a deceased friend. The two procedures have in common the fact of a message to the other world. But the noteworthy feature in the Ainu and Borneo rites is that these definitely open communication between man and the gods and secure the good will and aid of the latter; they are thus religious and sacrificial in a sense that is not true of the mere sending of a message to a dead person. It is also to be noted that, in the crudest known rites of this nature, it is a sacred (that is, divine) beast that is sent as messenger, and not a human being; and therefore the employment of a human being in the specific character of sacrifice would seem to be a relatively late custom.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Suggestions of an ambassadorial function for sacrificial animals are cited above (from Frazer), and after this article was prepared I found that a view somewhat similar to that here given had been expressed by MM. Hubert and Mauss in their "Essai sur le Sacrifice" in *L'Année Sociologique*, vol. ii. 1898. These gentlemen, starting not with simple savage forms, but with late elaborate sacrificial rituals, particularly the Hindu and the Hebrew, reach the conclusion that sacrifice is a religious act which, by the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who performs it, or of certain objects in which this person is interested; that the sacrificial procedure consists in establishing a communication between the sacred world and the profane world by the intermediation of a victim, that is to say, of a thing destroyed in the course of the ceremony; that the object of the slaying is to detach the sacred soul of the animal from its profane body, and that the disengaged soul may be employed to convey the wishes of the worshippers to the celestial Powers. I am glad to find myself so far in accord with these eminent scholars. It is not clear to me, however, by what path they reach their conclusion; the idea of intermediation or ambassadorial function is not expressed in the Hindu, Hebrew, and Greek rituals, and nothing in our authors'

analysis (if I have understood them correctly) appears to demand it. Further, the distinction they make between the sacred soul and the profane body of the victim is not borne out by the history of ritual; on the contrary, the body, from the earliest times onward, is sacred, and the partaking of the flesh, as sacred, forms an important part of most ancient sacrificial procedures. Nor is it true, as they represent, that the animal is sanctified by the sacrificial procedure; the animal is sacred by nature, and it is for that very reason that it is chosen to be a messenger to the gods. But notwithstanding what I conceive to be serious defects in their general construction of the sacrificial ceremony, they appear to have divined its fundamental idea, and their essay is suggestive throughout.